

HUNTING MUSK-OXEN NEAR THE POLE.*

BY LIEUT. R. E. PEARY.

(*The Arctic Explorer.*)

Illustrated by RALPH CLEAVER.



ON the 15th of May, 1895, the storm which for two days had held Lee, Henson and myself prisoners upon the Independence Bay moraine, the northern shore of the "Great Ice," more than 4,000 feet above the level of the sea, ceased, and in a very short time I had

completed all the preparations for a trip over the land in search of the musk-oxen which would be our salvation. Matt and all the dogs were to accompany me; and I took the little "Chopsie" sledge, our rifles, four days' supply of tea, biscuits and oil—we had had no meat for several days—and the remainder of the dog food, a lump of frozen walrus meat somewhat larger than a man's head. Lee was to remain at the tent during our absence.

The almost entire absence of snow on this northern land was a surprise as well as an annoyance to me, since it threatened to seriously damage my sledges. But, by keeping well ahead of the dogs, I was able to pick out a fairly good, though circuitous, path along the numerous snow drifts which lay on the leeward side of the hills and mountains.

After some twelve hours of steady marching, we were close to musk-ox valley, where, three years before, Astrup and myself had seen and killed the first of these animals. Leaving Matt with the sledge and dogs, I took my rifle and entered the valley, hoping to find them there, or traces of them, again. So far we had not seen the slightest indication of musk-

oxen, though we had followed the same route where on my previous visit their traces had been visible on almost every square rod of ground.

My examination of the valley failed to show the least trace of their presence, and I returned to the sledge in a mood the reverse of cheerful. Could it be that the musk-oxen of this region were migratory, retreating southward along the east coast in the autumn, and returning in late spring or early summer, and that we were too early for them? Or had the sight and smell of us and



From a photo by]

[H. S. Parsons, St. John's, Newfoundland.

LIEUTENANT PEARY.

our dogs, and the carcasses of their slain comrades in that to them awful visitation of three years before, terrified them so that they had deserted this region completely? These reflections were emphasized by the facts that we had now been marching for a long time, were tired with the unaccustomed

* Copyright by Perry, Mason & Co.

exertion of climbing up and down hills, and were weak and hungry from our long and scant diet of tea and biscuits. Our hunger was partially appeased by a recourse to the dog food. True, this was a frozen mixture of walrus meat, blubber, hair, sand, and various other foreign substances, but it went just the same; and the fact that the meat was pronouncedly "high," and the blubber more or less rancid, caused no complaint from us. Yet we were unable to satisfy ourselves even with this unattractive food, as the dogs were more in need of it than we.

A few miles beyond Musk-ox Valley I saw a fresh hare-track leading in the same direction in which we were going, and a few hundred yards beyond came upon the hare itself squatting among the rocks a few paces distant. I called to Matt, who was some little distance back, to stop the dogs and come up with his rifle. He was so affected by the prospect of a good dinner that, though a good shot, the first and second bullets missed the mark, but at the third the beautiful, spotless little animal collapsed into a shapeless mass, and on the instant gaunt hunger leapt upon us like a starving wolf upon its prey.

A little pond surrounded by high banks, a short distance from us, offered the advantages of ice from which to melt water for cooking purposes. Here we camped, lit our lamp, and cooked and ate the entire hare. It was the first full meal we had had for nearly six weeks—the first meal possessing sufficient substance and staying quality upon which to do a heavy day's work—and lying down, as we were, upon the

snow-covered shore of the little pond, without tent or sleeping-bag, or anything except the clothes we wore, and with the snow-flakes falling thickly upon us, we slept the sleep of tired children in their cosy beds.

The next morning we pushed on for a valley near Navy Cliff, where Astrup and myself had seen numerous musk-ox tracks. At the entrance of this valley I came upon a track, but so indistinct that it is quite possible that it might have been made the previous fall. Following it a short distance,

the accompanying tracks of a calf were discernible, showing at once that the tracks were of this season, and a little farther on there were traces that were but a few days old.

Fastening our dogs securely to a rock, and muzzling them so that they could neither chew themselves loose nor make a noise to disturb the musk-oxen, we passed rapidly down the valley, Winchesters in hand, with our eyes fixed eagerly upon the tracks. The feeding-ground of the herd on the preceding day was soon reached, and their tracks, and the places where they had dug away the snow in

search of grass and moss, showed that there was quite a herd of them. Circling the feeding-ground as rapidly as we could, we at length found the tracks of the herd leading out of the labyrinth and up the slopes of the surrounding mountains. Following these, our eyes were soon gladdened by sight of a group of black spots on a little terrace just below the crest of the mountain. Seen through the glass some of the animals were lying down. Evidently the herd was beginning its midday siesta. We reached the edge



From a photo by]

[H. S. Parsons, St. John's, Newfoundland.

MRS. PEARY, WHO ACCOMPANIED HER HUSBAND ON HIS PERILOUS EXPEDITIONS.

of the terrace to windward of the animals and sought shelter behind a big boulder. The musk-oxen were about 200 yards distant and numbered twenty-two.

I wonder if a single one of my readers really knows what hunger is. Henson and myself were worn to the bone with scant rations and hard work, and that hard work had left the little covering on our bones in the shape of lean, tense muscles and wires of sinew. The supper from the hare, that meal of fresh, hot, luscious meat, the first adequate meal in nearly 600 miles of daily snowshoeing, had wakened every merciless hunger fang that during the previous weeks had been gradually dulled into insensibility. It had been the taste of freshly-spilled blood to the long-tamed tiger; and now the big black animals before us were not game, but meat, and every nerve and fibre in my gaunt body was vibrating with a savage lust for that meat—meat that should be soft and warm, meat into which the teeth could sink and tear and rend, meat that would not blister lips and tongue with its frost, nor ring like a rock against the teeth.

Panting and quivering with excitement, we lay for a few moments. We could not risk a shot at that distance.

“Do you think they will come for us?” said Matt.

“God knows! I hope so, boy; for then we are sure of some of them. Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Come on, then.”

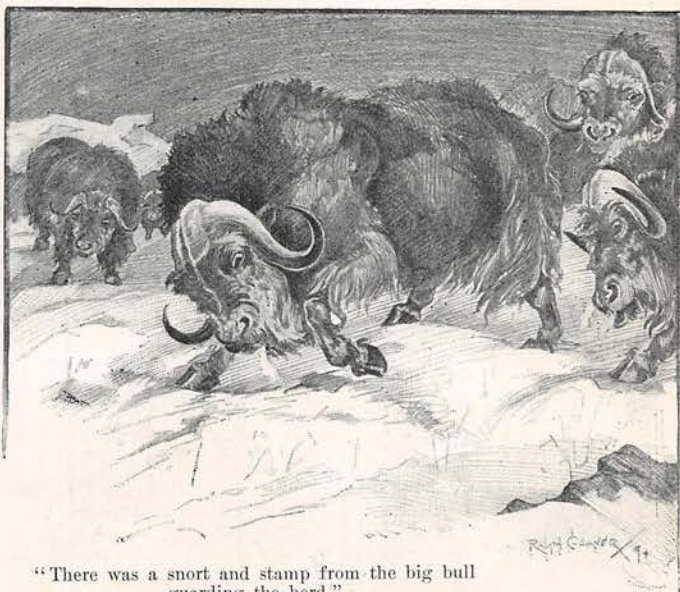
One of us one side of the big boulder, the other the other, and we dashed across the rocks and snow straight towards them.

There was a snort and stamp from the big bull guarding the herd, and the next instant every animal was on his feet, and, thank God, facing us; the next they were in close line with lowered heads and horns. I could have yelled for joy if I had had the breath to spare.

Every one of us has read some of the thrilling stories of travellers in the Russian forests, chased by hungry wolves, and our feelings have been wrought up to the highest pitch of sympathy for the poor fellows in

their efforts to escape. But did any of us ever stop to think how those other poor fellows, the wolves, felt with their empty stomachs? I know now just what *their* feelings are, and my sympathies are with the wolves. I was a wolf myself at that moment.

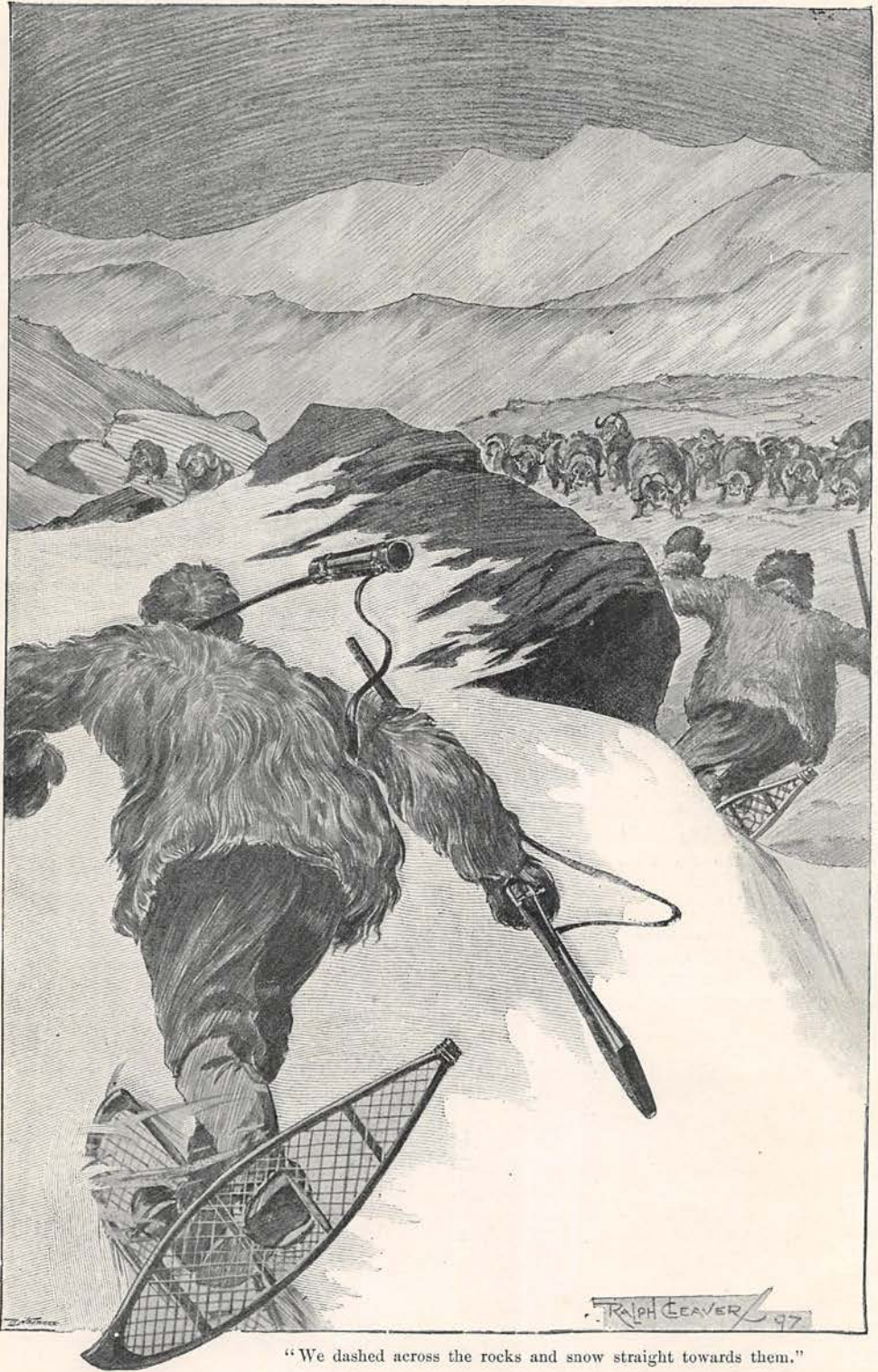
We were within less than fifty yards of the herd, when the big bull, with a quick motion, lowered his horns still more. Instinct, Providence, call it what you will, told me it was the signal for the herd to charge. Without slackening my pace, I pulled my Winchester to my shoulder and sent a bullet at the back of his neck over the white, impervious shield of the great horns. Heart, and soul, and brain, and eyes went



“There was a snort and stamp from the big bull guarding the herd.”

with that singing bullet. I felt that I was strong enough, and hungry enough, and wolf enough, that, had the bull been alone, I could have sprung upon him bare-handed and torn the life-blood from his throat. But against the entire herd we would have been powerless; once the black avalanche had gained momentum, we would have been crushed by it like the crunching snow crystals under our feet.

As the bull fell upon his knees the herd wavered. A cow half turned, and, as Matt's rifle cracked, fell with a bullet back of her fore-shoulder. Without raising my rifle above my hips, another one dropped. Then another for Matt; then the herd broke, and we hurried in pursuit.



RALPH CEAVER 97

"We dashed across the rocks and snow straight towards them."

A wounded cow wheeled, and, with lowered head, was about to charge me; again Matt's rifle cracked, and she fell. As I rushed past her, he shouted, "My last cartridge."

A short distance beyond, the remainder of the herd faced about again, and I put a bullet into the breast of another bull, but though the blood crimsoned his chest and legs, it did not stop him, and the herd broke again and disappeared over a sharp ridge. I had neither wind nor strength to follow. Suddenly the back of one of the animals appeared above the ridge. I whirled and fired. I did not see the sights, I scarcely think I saw my rifle, but felt my aim as I would with harpoon or stone. I heard the thud of the bullet, saw the fatal crimson stain behind the fore shoulder as the animal disappeared, then sank down on the snow, used up. But I knew he was mine.

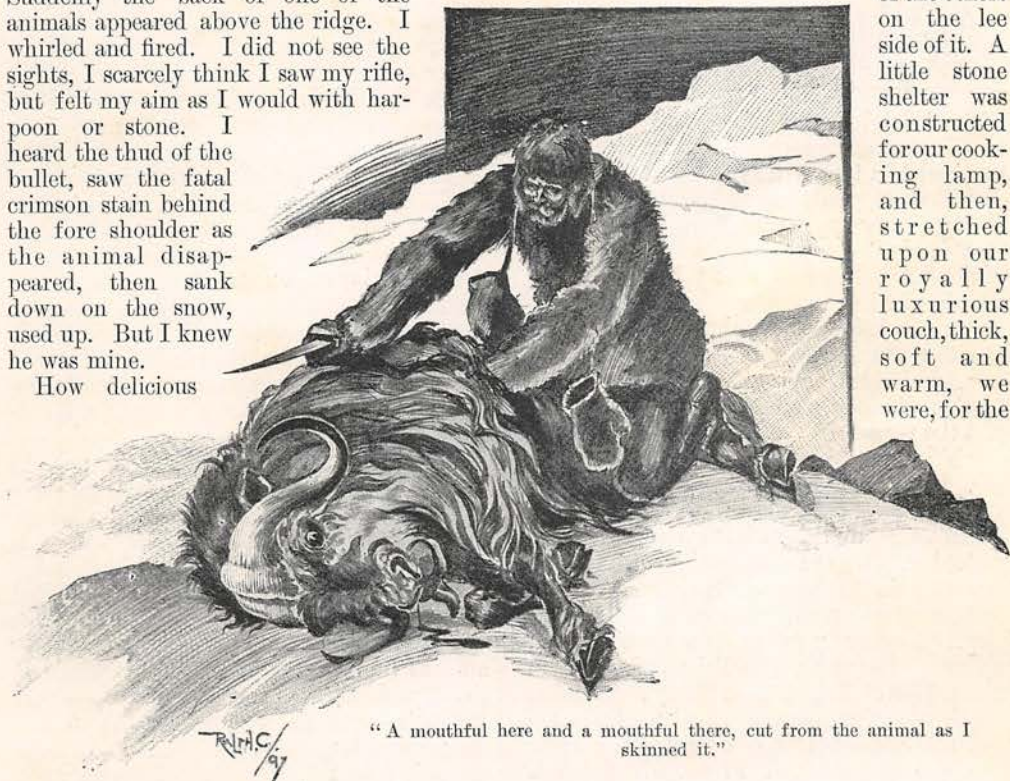
How delicious

they, too, could eat no more; and lay gorged and quiet upon the rocks.

The removal of the great shaggy black pelts of the musk-oxen was neither an easy nor a speedy job; and by the time it was completed it was midnight; the sun low over the mountains in the north, and a biting wind whistling about our airy location.

We were glad to drag the skins to a central place, construct a wind guard, with the assistance of the sledge, a few stones, and a couple of the skins, and make a bed

of the others on the lee side of it. A little stone shelter was constructed for our cooking lamp, and then, stretched upon our royally luxurious couch, thick, soft and warm, we were, for the



"A mouthful here and a mouthful there, cut from the animal as I skinned it."

that tender, raw, warm meat was—a mouthful here and a mouthful there, cut from the animal as I skinned it! I ate till I dared eat no more, although still unsatisfied.

Then Matt went back to bring up the dogs and sledge, while I commenced the work of removing the skins from the dead animals. With Matt's return came the supremest luxury of all! That was to toss great lumps of the rich, warm meat to the gaunt shadows which we called dogs, till

first time, able to spare the time to make ourselves some tea and cook some of the delicious musk-ox meat. Then, with the savage, sombre northern land lying like a map below us, the barren rocks mottled here and there with eternal snowdrifts, the summits of the distant mountains disappearing in a mist of driving snow, and the biting breath of the "Great Ice" following us even here, and drifting the fine snow over and about our shelter, we slept again as tired children sleep.